Notes re stereotypes and expert v. public perception of risk

Todorov also discussed feelings and attitudes in lecture, pointing out that attitudes are often unintentional, automatic and difficult to control. According to Todorov, stereotypes are automatically activated and must be suppressed by a thoughtful, controlled process. One of the more interesting ideas in lecture was that we process information differently depending on our processing capabilities and motivation. This echoed a point made by Cialdini: decision-making shortcuts are particularly important when our cognitive resources are low – for example, when we are stressed, rushed or tired. As our motivation and processing capabilities decrease, we increasingly rely on heuristics and cues to make our decisions. This is particularly relevant for bag screeners and other airport workers – they work under very stressful situations characterized by intense time pressure. Thus, we can expect that their cognitive resources would be low and that they would, therefore, be more likely to rely on stereotypes and other decision-making shortcuts.

The link between emotions and decision-making also influences how we allocate government resources. Lowenstein and Sunstein both point out that policy makers often respond to public concern about specific risks, despite the fact that the public’s perception of the risk may be poor. This can distort resource allocation – as may be the case in the current focus on improving airline safety. As Lowenstein et al. point out, “[t]he divergence between the emotional reactions of the public to risks and professionals’ appraisals of risks creates a significant dilemma for policy makers” (281). Drawing on the work of Sunstein, the authors highlight the impact of vivid imagery on people’s emotional reactions, pointing out that people tend to overestimate the risk of
events that conjure up vivid images, while downplaying the risk of less vivid threats. As we discussed earlier when we read Sunstein’s work, this distorts resource allocation. This is particularly true in the case of airline safety – the images of September 11th were replayed endless on the TV so people have very vivid images associated with the lack of airline safety. Such social amplification of risk helps explain why the public has been so concerned about the risks of inadequate safety in airline travel, despite the objective facts that the risk of death or injury in other forms of transportation (particularly automobile travel) is much higher.

Further, although Lowenstein et al. do not explore the weaknesses of experts’ assessments of risk, we know from previous readings that experts are not infallible and are, in fact, subject to some of the same biases that plague the rest of us. It is unclear whether government should rely more on expert assessments of risk or respond more to public perception of risk. Given that both the public and experts themselves are fallible, it is not clear that it is an either/or decision.

I was unsatisfied with the lack of direction about how to mitigate the powerful emotions that shape people’s decision-making. If the emotions we instinctively feel are due in part to the evolutionary process, then do we simply have to develop a healthy fear of more recent threats such as guns and sexually transmitted infections? Or is there some way that public policy could shape these fears? And, if so, is this even an appropriate realm for government intervention (to shape people’s emotional reactions to perceived threats) or is this too paternalistic?